

## Starving for Old Growth Forests

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On July 27, James Darling and Robert Fuller stopped eating. Equipped with signs and lawn chairs, they set up camp in front of the office of Sheila Malcolmson, NDP MLA for Nanaimo. In a letter to Premier John Horgan and all MLAs, the two men said they were launching a hunger strike until the government ended old growth logging in B.C.

Darling is a 35-year-old musician. During a normal summer, he would be busy playing weddings. But this year, COVID-19 has cost him nearly all his gigs. He is also a member of the Nanaimo chapter of Extinction Rebellion, and father to a two-year-old toddler.

A hunger strike is “an extreme thing to do,” Darling told The Tyee. “But at this point in history, I think this sort of thing is absolutely necessary.” The NDP government isn’t taking current climate and ecological issues seriously, Darling says. “It seems incredibly shortsighted and stupid to be cutting and wiping out these rare ecosystems that are still intact.”

Old growth forests are more than just homes for some of B.C.’s 1,807 endangered species. In their letter, Darling and Fuller say the massive old trees are natural carbon sinks, and their ability to sequester carbon cannot be replaced by replanting with seedlings.

Like Darling, 61-year-old Fuller is a Nanaimo Extinction Rebellion member. He’s no stranger to the forest industry as a former B.C. Forest Service and Canadian Forest Service employee, a sawmill worker and a tree planter.

"I remember driving through these old growth forests on the B.C. west coast, and I just marvelled at them," said Fuller. "Those are now, a lot of them, just ghosts to me."

Their families support their hunger strike, although concerned for their health. Darling plans to go hungry for at least three weeks. Fuller is less definitive about his timeline, but is committed to strike until his health is affected.

Both men are aware of the risks, but accept them as the price of pressing for change. They are sustaining themselves on water and electrolytes.

If the hunger strike ends unsuccessfully, Fuller says they and the Nanaimo chapter of Extinction Rebellion will move on to other nonviolent action. Options could include blocking logging roads, sitting in trees, or going into the offices of forestry companies.

As long as the action is nonviolent, says Fuller, "nothing is off the table."

"I'm doing this now so that my grandkids, when they're 60, will not have to do this," said Fuller.

Fuller was advised to write to his MLA, but, for him, that wasn't enough. "When James and I were talking about it, [a hunger strike] seemed to be the approach... which may startle people, but also bring people together."

One of their goals is to bring activist groups together as a united front. According to Fuller, the pair are receiving overwhelming support and social media have let them reach people across Canada.

The support isn't surprising.

Two professional foresters appointed by the B.C. government to lead a review of the province's management of its remaining old growth forests last year told the Narwhal that in four months spent visiting B.C. communities almost everyone consulted wanted the oldest trees preserved.

If there's such consensus, why have two activists been pushed to the point of starving themselves in an attempt to force the provincial government to act?

Old growth forests have a high economic value, with more and better-quality timber per hectare.

The provincial government claims that 23 per cent of B.C.'s old growth forests are intact. But an independent study published in April found that only three per cent of B.C. is capable of supporting the giant trees that people think of as old growth. Thanks to logging, only 2.7 per cent of the trees on that land are truly old growth.

Forestry has long been one of the foundations of B.C.'s economy. In 2018, forestry and logging contributed over \$1.9 billion to the province's real GDP — still less than one per cent. The forestry industry as a whole employed nearly 53,000 people, with 12,208 of those jobs in logging.

Despite the concern about protecting old growth, logging isn't slowing down. A plan for the Elphinstone area of the Sunshine Coast released in March shows that more than five times the usual number of cutblocks are available for logging over the next five years. The plan includes Dakota Ridge, an area with an unusually high number of black bear dens and what is likely Canada's oldest tree.

The Tyee sought comment from Horgan's office, the Truck Loggers Association and the Interior Logging Association. None replied.

Fuller said he spent decades in the industry and sympathizes with forestry workers who might lose their jobs if more restrictions are placed on logging.

"I worked in a sawmill in Mackenzie, just north of Prince George. So, I can come at this with the mentality of a northerner and a person that's worked in a sawmill," said Fuller. "My whole thing is sustainable forests and sustainable forestry."

Fuller also wants the provincial government to support the wood manufacturing industry here in B.C. rather than exporting raw logs and other materials. "It boggles the mind why we aren't supporting our own workers, here," he said. "Why not invest in our own economy?"

Sawmills on Vancouver Island have been shutting down, Fuller said. He wants to see B.C. logs processed in sawmills in the province and displaced forestry workers retrained, like he was.

After Fuller stopped tree planting in 2000, he went through a government retraining program that gave him a diploma in horticulture. He also wants to see more investment in ecotourism, which he believes will provide additional jobs and government revenue.

"I take it very seriously when people say, 'you're going to take our jobs away,'" said Fuller. "It breaks my heart. But when it comes to preserving the planet and the species upon it, I'm sure we can do better."

The giant trees' important role in sequestering carbon shouldn't be ignored, the pair say.

"We're facing a catastrophe this century," said Darling. "The latest, most up-to-date climate models are predicting that a doubling of CO<sub>2</sub> [emissions] would actually cause a five-degree temperature rise this century."

Darling said his hunger strike is a reminder of what humanity can expect if global heating brings widespread crop failures.

"I have a two-year-old," said Darling. "He could see the turn of the next century, and if you look at the trajectory we're on, it looks like we're heading for civilization's collapse in the coming decades."

Despite the presence of Fuller, Darling and other Extinction Rebellion members outside her office, Malcolmson didn't respond to the demonstrations until Friday. Malcolmson and Doug Routley, the MLA for Nanaimo-North Cowichan, engaged with Fuller and Darling over Skype for what the two activists describe as an unproductive 10-minute conversation.

"They said that they were supportive, and they thanked us for doing the demonstration," said Darling, "but they said that their hands are tied, and they can't do anything about old growth logging."

Fuller said Malcolmson, parliamentary secretary for the environment in the Horgan government, seems unwilling to challenge the party line.

"Sheila Malcolmson, when she was a federal MP, was very vocal about the environment," said Fuller. "She was very vocal about pipelines, forestry. And now... it's nothing. It's absolutely nothing."

The five days spent outside Malcolmson's office was not the end of Fuller and Darling's protest activities. The pair are currently demonstrating outside Routley's constituency office in Nanaimo. On Saturday, Extinction Rebellion Nanaimo is hosting a rally at Maffeo Sutton Park. Participants are asked to wear masks and prepare to socially distance as much as possible. [Tyee]

Source: <https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2020/08/05/Old-Growth-Forests-Hunger-Strike/>